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SUBJECT: AMAL PERSPECTIVES ON HIZBALLAH CHANGES

REFTEL: A) BEIRUT 2725, B) BEIRUT 2659

¶1. CONFIDENTIAL -- ENTIRE TEXT.

¶2. SUMMARY. HIZBALLAH ANNOUNCED THE RE-ELECTION OF ITS TWO TOP LEADERS AND SOME MODEST STRUCTURAL CHANGES, BUT HAS NOT RELEASED NAMES OF NEW CONSULTATIVE COUNCIL MEMBERS, OSTENSIBLY ON SECURITY GROUNDS. A SENIOR AMAL OFFICIAL CONFIRMED HIS PARTY'S UNDERSTANDING THAT HIZBALLAH ULTRA-EXTREMIST SUBHI TUFAYLI IS OUT. THE AMAL SOURCE SAID THE CHANGE CAME AMIDST A WIDER SHIFT IN POWER WITHIN HIZBALLAH, AWAY FROM BIQA' VALLEY CADRES TOWARD SOUTHERN LEADERS. WHILE THE CHANGES WITHIN HIZBALLAH ARE SEEN HERE AS FURTHER STEPS PREPARATORY TO AN EVENTUAL TRANSITION FROM MILITIA TO LEGITIMATE POLITICAL PARTY, AMAL BELIEVES (OR AT LEAST HOPES) THAT HIZBALLAH IS MISTAKEN IN ITS CONFIDENCE OF SYRIAN BACKING FOR ITS POLITICAL AMBITIONS IN AN ERA OF PEACE. END SUMMARY.

¶3. HIZBALLAH HAS ANNOUNCED THE RE-ELECTION OF SECRETARY GENERAL HASSAN NASRALLAH AND DEPUTY SEC GEN NA'IM QASSIM AT A GENERAL CONVENTION EARLIER THIS MONTH, BUT WILL NOT RELEASE THE MEMBERSHIP OF THE CONSULTATIVE COUNCIL (MAJLIS ASH-SHURA). A PARTY SPOKESMAN CITED THE ISRAELI THREAT AS REASON FOR SECRECY. THERE WAS NO WORD ON WHETHER NASRALLAH HAS RETURNED FROM IRAN, WHERE HE WAS PRESUMABLY VETTING THE CONVENTION RESULTS.

¶4. MUHAMMAD 'UBAYD, POLITICAL ADVISOR FOR AMAL MOVEMENT AND SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE INFORMATION MINISTRY, CONFIRMED TO US THAT SUBHI TUFAYLI, FORMER PARTY SEC GEN AND A RECOGNIZED LEADER OF THE MOST RADICAL TREND IN HIZBALLAH, DID NOT WIN RE-ELECTION TO THE COUNCIL. 'UBAYD SAW TUFAYLI'S OUSTER AS PART OF A TREND AT THE CONVENTION TO EASE OUT BIQA' VALLEY ELEMENTS IN FAVOR OF SOUTHERNERS (THE HOME BASE OF NA S RALLAH ) .

¶5. THE BIQA'-SOUTH FAULT LINE COINCIDES GENERALLY WITH A (COMPARATIVE) HAWK-DOVE SPLIT INSIDE THE PARTY. HIZBALLAH HAS A STRONGER BASE IN THE BIQA' AND AMONG SOUTHERN SUBURB RESIDENTS ORIGINALLY FROM THE BIQA', THAN IT DOES IN THE SOUTH, WHERE POLITICAL LOYALTIES ARE MORE LIKELY TO REST WITH AMAL AND THE OLD LANDED FAMILIES. HIZBALLAH HAS WORKED TO MAKE IN-ROADS THERE, BUT THE UNPOPULARITY OF THE RESISTANCE IN MANY QUARTERS ALONG THE FRONT LINES HAS UNDERMINED THOSE EFFORTS.

¶6. CONSOLIDATION OF HIZBALLAH LEADERSHIP IN SOUTHERN HANDS IS CONSISTENT WITH THE STRENGTHENING OF THOSE FORCES WITHIN THE PARTY WHO ARE BRACED FOR AN END TO MILITIA ACTIVITIES, AND WANT TO PREPARE FOR MORE NORMAL POLITICAL ACTIVISM. AMAL OFFICIAL 'UBAYD CLAIMED TO US, HOWEVER, THAT HIZBALLAH'S MAINSTREAM HAS OVER-ESTIMATED SYRIAN WILLINGNESS TO PROTECT THE PARTY ONCE PEACE WITH ISRAEL IS REACHED. COMMENT: THIS OBSERVATION COULD BE WISHFUL THINKING ON THE PART OF AMAL, WHICH IS STRUGGLING WITH HIZBALLAH FOR SHI'A LOYALTIES. IF DAMASCUS IS TRUE TO FORM, IT WOULD MOST LIKELY NOURISH BUT CONFINE HIZBALLAH, AS A TOOL TO KEEP SYRIA'S PRINCIPAL SHI'A ALLY, NABIH BERRI, IN LINE. END COMMENT.

17. REF A CONVEYS OTHER DETAILS ON CHANGES MADE WITHIN HIZBALLAH, AS REPORTED BY IBRAHIM AL-AMIN IN "AL-SAFIR" NEWSPAPER. IN SHORT, TYRE-BASED HIZBALLAH MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT MUHAMMAD RA'D BECAME HEAD OF THE POLITICAL COUNCIL (THE RENAMED POLITBURO), BUMPING OUT HUSSEIN KHALIL. KHALIL WAS NAMED POLITICAL ADVISOR TO NASRALLAH, IN WHAT LOOKS LIKE A COME-DOWN. A JIHADI COUNCIL WAS MADE TO CONSOLIDATE CONTROL OVER ALL SECURITY AND MILITARY OPERATIONS, UNDER SOUTHERNER HASHIM SAFI-AD-DIN. THE BLOC OF HIZBALLAH MPS GAINED A MORE FORMAL ROLE WITHIN THE PARTY WITH THE CREATION OF THE "COUNCIL OF THE PARLIAMENTARY BLOC." A LEBANESE REPRESENTATIVE OF AL-KHAMEIN'I, THE BIQA'-BASED MUHAMMAD YAZBEK, RETAINED A PLACE IN THE EXECUTIVE BOARD OF THE CONSULTATIVE COUNCIL.

18. FOR WHAT IT IS WORTH, PAPERS ALSO REPORT TRENDS WHICH SUGGEST BUSINESS AS USUAL FOR HIZBALLAH: THE OFTEN INACCURATE DAILY "NIDA' AL-WATAN" REPORTED THE RE-ELECTION OF IMAD MUGHNIYAH AS THE CENTRAL SECURITY CHIEF, WITH FOUR ASSISTANTS NAMED MUSTAFA BADR AD-DIN, TALAL HAMIYAH, HAJ MUHAMMAD AHMAZ, AND HUSAYNI ATRYSSI. THE MORE RESPECTED "AN-NAHAR" REPORTS THAT HIZBALLAH HAS RECEIVED MORE SOPHISTICATED WEAPONS FOR USE AGAINST THE ISRAELIS, BUT OFFERS NO FURTHER CLARIFICATION.

SCHLICHER